

July 20, 2023

The Netherlands in the Arctic

Katherine E. Todd
NAADSN Research Fellow

Summary

This paper discusses the key Arctic defence and security interests and priorities of the Netherlands, highlighted in its polar strategy for 2021 to 2025, *Prepared for Change*. The strategy aligns with Canada's Arctic defence and security interests and priorities, set out in *Canada's Arctic Northern Policy Framework* and defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged*. The Netherlands' first polar strategy, evaluating the Netherlands Polar Program and detailing its interests in the Arctic, was released in 2009 by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. Three subsequent iterations of the strategy have been released, each acting as a guiding framework for the Netherlands' actions and investments in polar regions. These strategies have focused on the Netherlands' polar research program and cooperating with the international community to achieve shared research goals. In the newest version, climate change, safety, and security are highlighted as areas of concern, as well as sustainable economic activity. The Netherlands and Canada share interest in bolstering research cooperation in the region, protecting the rules based international order (RBIO), and promoting sustainable economic development, as well as having Arctic nations lead in these areas. The two states diverge, however, in their military focus in the region and concern about Russia's Northern Sea Route (NSR).

Key Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

The Netherlands published their renewed polar strategy in March 2021. The strategy details the importance of polar regions for the Netherlands and how climate change is affecting both poles and, as a result, the Netherlands, through associated changes in weather patterns, biodiversity, economic opportunities, and geopolitical relations. According to the strategy, Dutch efforts in the Arctic primarily revolve around "the protection of human interests, the environment, and international security." The Netherlands' role in preserving political stability and the country's intention to increase diplomatic efforts in the region are also emphasized. Scientific research through the Dutch Polar Programme is identified as the most important instrument to achieve the Netherlands' polar goals.¹

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Netherlands' Polar Strategy 2021-2025, Prepared for Change* (The Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2021), 6.

The three cornerstones of the 2021 to 2025 strategy are:

1. “Protecting natural habitats and the environment;”
2. “strengthening international cooperation;” and
3. “ensuring sustainable economic activity.”²

Context: Literature Review

The Netherlands’ 2016 to 2020 polar strategies state, “although the Netherlands is not an Arctic state... it wants to play a meaningful role” in the region as part of its responsibility to the “Global Commons.”³ In the 2016 to 2020 Dutch polar strategy, the country began recognizing the geopolitical shifts occurring in the Arctic due to the melting of sea ice and the resulting increase in great power competition there.⁴ The government emphasized the importance of cooperation between actors in the Arctic and the work of the Arctic Council to address these changes but, importantly, did not discuss security in the region.⁵ Instead, Dutch contributions to polar research were highlighted. Polar research was framed as necessary for the Netherlands to gain insight into how the world is changing and will continue to change, as well as how to responsibly conduct activities in the Arctic.⁶ These investments in knowledge about the poles also aim to enable economic development in both regions, including in natural resource and tourism industries.⁷

Unlike the Netherlands’ previous strategies, the 2021 to 2025 polar strategy made Dutch security interests explicit. Acknowledging the interplay between climate change, economic opportunity, and geopolitical competition in the Arctic, the Strategy states that “political, military, economic and ecological security cannot be regarded in isolation from one another.”⁸ This reiterates the country’s position in the 2019 *Netherlands Defence Doctrine*, where political stability, economic, and ecological security are listed as vital interests to the Netherlands.⁹ The Netherlands looks to preserve political stability in the region by acting as an Observer in the Arctic Council, fostering bilateral relationships with the Arctic states, and preserving the international legal order.¹⁰ Netherlands has been and continues to be active in the Council since it was established.¹¹ Diplomatic efforts in the region by the Arctic Ambassador of the Netherlands are also slated to continue.¹² As geopolitical tensions rise, the Netherlands articulates a belief in the international legal order and that cooperating with other actors in the region will increase transparency and is in the interest of everyone.¹³ The protection

² *Prepared for Change*, 9.

³ Kimberley Kruijver, Adája Stoetman & Dick Zandee, “The Future of Arctic Security: The Geopolitical Pressure Cooker and the Consequences for the Netherlands,” *Clingendael Institute* (2020): 6 and Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, *Pole Position – NL 2.0, Strategy for the Netherlands Polar Programme 2016 – 2020* (The Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2014), 7.

⁴ Kruijver, Stoetman & Zandee, “The Future of Arctic Security,” 6.

⁵ Karen Everett, Lassi Heininen, Barbora Padrtova & Anni Reissell, “Arctic Policies and Strategies – Analysis, Synthesis, and Trend,” *International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis* (2020): 214 – 216.

⁶ *Pole Position – NL 2.0*, 5.

⁷ *Pole Position – NL 2.0*, 7.

⁸ *Prepared for Change*, 8.

⁹ Ministry of Defence, *Netherlands Defence Doctrine* (The Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2019), 42.

¹⁰ *Prepared for Change*, 6.

¹¹ Advisory Council on International Affairs, *The Future of the Arctic Region: Cooperation or Confrontation* (The Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2014), 57.

¹² *Prepared for Change*, 6.

¹³ *Prepared for Change*, 30.

of a “properly functioning international legal order” is also listed as one of the Netherlands’ vital interests for national security.¹⁴

The *Netherlands Defence Doctrine* and strategy highlight the country’s membership in NATO and that the emerging ‘multi-order’ world creates new instability and threats.¹⁵ To address these threats, the Netherlands aims to support Arctic security policy developments through NATO in its latest strategy.¹⁶ The strategy also acknowledges that security in the Arctic and decisions made there should be managed by the eight Arctic states and emphasizes the importance of the Arctic Council’s role in facilitating cooperation between actors in the region.¹⁷ Though the *Netherlands Defence Vision 2035* states that, “largescale military conflict in the Arctic is not expected in the next 15 years,”¹⁸ the Ministry of Defence acknowledges that developing threats in the region may quickly affect both national security and the security of Northern Europe.¹⁹

Climate change may create economic opportunities for the Netherlands, including new shipping routes and access to resources for exploitation.²⁰ Economic security in the Netherlands is largely dependent on overseas trade.²¹ The country expects to benefit from increased trade volumes moving through the NSR which connects to the Netherlands’ Port of Rotterdam.²² However, the *2023 Security Strategy for the Kingdom of the Netherlands*, identifies competition over access to and control of shipping routes as a potential driver of conflict.²³ In 2014, the Netherlands’ Advisory Council on International Affairs wrote a report on the future of the Arctic discussing the promise of these economic opportunities as well as uncertainty about their viability due to rising geopolitical tension between countries.²⁴ Since then, the Netherlands has been left unsure of whether shipping routes and resource extraction will bolster their economic security. The Netherlands’ 2023 policy framework on global multilateralism identified Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and China’s growing economic importance as areas of additional concern, as they may hinder cooperation in the Arctic that the Netherlands believes is crucial.²⁵ In *Prepared for Change*, as well as the prior reports, the importance of cooperation and compliance with international agreements and standards for sustainable economic growth, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, is stressed.²⁶

The Netherlands’ Polar Program guides environmental research on climate change, ecosystem dynamics, and “sustainability, liveability and security/safety.”²⁷ Its climate change studies focus on changes in polar oceans, atmosphere,

¹⁴ *Netherlands Defence Doctrine*, 42.

¹⁵ *Netherlands Defence Doctrine*, 37, 39 – 40.

¹⁶ *Prepared for Change*, 12, 29.

¹⁷ *Prepared for Change*, 11 – 12.

¹⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Defence Vision 2035: Fighting for a Safer Future* (The Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2020), 57.

¹⁹ *Defence Vision 2035*, 57.

²⁰ *The Future of the Arctic Region*, 57.

²¹ Kruijver, Stoetman & Zandee, “The Future of Arctic Security,” 6.

²² *The Future of the Arctic Region*, 57.

²³ Ministry of Justice and Security, *Security Strategy for the Kingdom of the Netherlands* (The Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2023), 15.

²⁴ *The Future of the Arctic Region*, 5, 55.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Global Multilateralism: Defining the Kingdom of the Netherlands’ Position in a Changing Multilateral Global Order* (The Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2023), 6, 14.

²⁶ *Prepared for Change*, 6, 9, 14 and *The Future of the Arctic Region*, 5.

²⁷ *Prepared for Change*, 50.

sea, land ice, and permafrost.²⁸ The knowledge gathered on the Arctic's ecology is meant to enable cooperative development and operations in the region.

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

Canada and the Netherlands share multiple areas of common interest, creating opportunities for advancing bilateral goals. Both countries invest in environmental research and aim to promote sustainable economic development across the Arctic. Each is also a staunch supporter the RBIO and regional cooperation in the Arctic.

Canada's *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* lists economic growth and scientific research in the Arctic as key government priorities.²⁹ Both countries aim to pursue these goals cooperatively and sustainably while protecting the environment, as evidenced in their commitments to the Arctic Council and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.³⁰ The natural resource and tourism sectors are highlighted as potential areas of growth.³¹ However, both strategies acknowledge the impacts economic development in the North may have Indigenous peoples and support the implementation of the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* to help protect Indigenous rights in the Arctic.

Other areas of potential cooperation is in preserving the RBIO and collaboration in activities such as search and rescue operations. Preserving international agreements such as the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* that regulates maritime activities and delineates maritime boundaries and the use of the Arctic Council as a forum to promote cooperation in areas such as scientific research and emergency response is in both country's interests.³² A specific area in which Canada and the Netherlands would benefit from working together is in search and rescue efforts. Canada has committed to increasing search and rescue responsiveness and capabilities in its *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*, while the Netherlands' latest polar strategy names cooperation with allies for search and rescue as an area where security and confidence can be built.³³

Issues of Divergence or Concern

There are two areas where Canada and the Netherlands' Arctic strategies diverge: their military focus in the region and enthusiasm about the NSR. One of the pillars of Canada's military defence strategy is "strong at home," including in the Arctic.³⁴ To ensure that Canada is able to defend the Arctic, the government is making major investments, including: the procurement of Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships, all-terrain vehicles designed for the Arctic environment, and space capabilities to improve situational awareness in the Arctic; the enhancement of Canadian Armed Forces presence in the region and the capabilities of the Canadian Rangers; and working with the United States to develop surveillance

²⁸ *Prepared for Change*, 50.

²⁹ Crown-Indigenous Northern Affairs Canada, *Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2019), 4.

³⁰ *Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy*, 8 and *Prepared for Change*, 14, 17.

³¹ *Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy*, 8.

³² *Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy*, 35.

³³ *Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy*, 7 and *Prepared for Change*, 30.

³⁴ *Strong, Secured, Engaged* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2017), 60.

technology for the Arctic and with Arctic allies and partners, including NATO, to conduct joint exercises and strengthen situational awareness and information sharing.³⁵ The Netherlands’s polar strategy and defence papers demonstrate no such military focus in the Arctic aside reiterating that the country is part of NATO and willing to respond to threats in the NATO treaty area swiftly and firmly, including in the Arctic.³⁶

The second area of divergence is that the Netherlands’ benefits from and is supportive of developments in the NSR. The promise of increased trade to the Port of Rotterdam through the NSR is in the Netherlands’ economic interests.³⁷ Canada, however, has noted concern about China’s use of the NSR as part of their “Polar Silk Road.”³⁸ Increased trade with China or Russia may support their regimes’ violations of human rights and aggression against other states.³⁹ Canada should monitor future trade patterns to ensure relations between China, Russia, and European states do not finance acts that go against the rules based international order.

Prepared by: Katherine E. Todd

Submitted: 18 July 2023

Reviewed by: Ryan Dean, Ph.D.

³⁵ *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 108-113.

³⁶ *Prepared for Change*, 12, 29.

³⁷ *The Future of the Arctic Region*, 57.

³⁸ Government of Canada, “Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs appearance before the House of Commons Special Committee on Canada-China Relations (CACN) – Briefing material.” *Special Committee on Canada-China Relations* (2022).

³⁹ Global Affairs Canada, *Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2022), 7 – 8 and *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 50.